

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRADE RETENTION  
AS AN INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR  
ACADEMIC FAILURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Over the past decade there has been public and political pressure to improve the quality of education. Schools are being encouraged to adopt grade retention policies to help children who are falling behind academically. Given the large number of students that will be affected by this educational intervention, a study of the effectiveness of retention is worthy of educational research. This research project includes a review of the literature regarding the characteristics of a student that make him or her more susceptible to grade retention. It also examines the academic, social, and emotional effectiveness of this educational intervention. The results of past research indicate that there are some personal characteristics that can predict grade retention, and there are few positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes of grade retention.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

Consider the following scenarios: a) A parent brings her son in for preschool screening and they recommend retaining the five-year old boy because he appears socially withdrawn and his birthday is just before the school cutoff date; b) A couple is informed by their daughter's teacher that she is not mastering the first grade reading curriculum and it might be best if she repeated first grade; and c) A seventh grade boy received all D's and F's the last two quarters of school. His teachers, counselor, and principal have suggested that holding him back a year might make him realize he needs to work harder in school.

All of these situations are examples of retention decisions made by school personnel. Many strategies for improving school performance currently are being debated regarding what should be done to help the large number of children who are not meeting the educational requirements. Schools are always searching for the most effective interventions to help children who fall behind academically or appear more immature than their peers (Foster, 1993).

There has been intense public and political pressure to improve the quality of education in the United States. As a result, many schools have adopted rigorous retention policies and practices over the past ten years. Grade retention is one of education's most common interventions for the "unprepared student." Retaining students in a grade often is used as a way to increase or meet educational standards. Many educators assume that by catching up on prerequisite skills, students will be less likely to fail when they go on to the next grade (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, retention was prevalent in British schools. Around 1860, the public schools in the United States quickly followed many of the educational

practices of Great Britain. As such, graded classrooms and grade retention was introduced to the American schools. Retention was so popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it was estimated that approximately every other child was retained at least once during their first eight years of school (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983).

Retention continued to be practiced until the 1930's, when it was challenged by the proponents of social promotion who feared retention would lead to negative effects on children's social and emotional development (Rose et al., 1983). In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers began to investigate the relationship between retention and dropouts (Owing & Magliaro, 1983). Over the next thirty years, students were commonly passed onto the next grade, grouped according to ability, and provided remedial help. Decisions to retain students were based upon achievement results, child's social maturity, emotional maturity, chronological age, attendance record, and home background (Rose et al., 1983).

In the past 25 years, the value of social promotion has been reevaluated. In the early 1960's, there was a decline in student achievement on standardized tests. Some people ascribe this decline in achievement to lenient academic and promotion standards. The public demand for educational accountability can be seen in the increasing requirements for minimum competency testing programs in the public schools that have been mandated by many state legislatures or local school boards (Rose et al., 1983). Retention became so politically popular in 1985 that thirty-one states mandated stricter promotion policies (Pierson & Connell, 1992). As such, the number of student retentions increased during the 1980's and 1990's.

Although no national statistics have been gathered on grade retention, some data has been analyzed from thirteen states and the District of Columbia. According to one

study (Pierson & Connell, 1992), it is estimated that 5-7 % (approximately 2.3 million American students) of public school children are retained in the United States annually. This percentage equals about two children out of a classroom of thirty.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Given the large number of students affected, a study of the effectiveness of retention is highly deserving of educational research. National concern is growing about the increase of student failure. Educators continue to struggle with the decision to retain or socially promote failing students. Those who choose to retain students often do so despite some research evidence that indicates there are negative effects of retention. Previous research studies and meta-analyses of past studies on the effects of retention indicate there can be significant negative effects for retained students (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Smith & Shepard, 1989; 1990). Retention may have harmful effects on the achievement, self-concept, social development, dropout rates, and future employment of students.

A review of the literature suggests that grade retention may not be an effective remediation strategy for students who are failing. Some studies (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1989) have also shown that retention can have negative effects on achievement, social adjustment, self-esteem, and high school dropout rates. Therefore, the research objective of this study is to examine whether or not grade retention has any positive effects on the social, academic, or emotional development of children. A related objective is to examine the effects of social promotion on our nation's youth.

### *Definition of Terms*

In a review of grade retention, the terms grade retention and social promotion need to be clarified to describe the educational practices of holding back a student or advancing a student to the next grade.

*Grade Retention.*

Grade retention is the practice of requiring a student to repeat a year of academic instruction at a particular level. It is different from course retention in that the pupil repeats the same grade, rather than one subject such as reading or math (Jackson, 1975),

*Social Promotion.*

Social Promotion is the practice of automatic advancement from grade to grade despite evidence that the student is not achieving the required performance standards in basic skills, maturity, or social behavioral problems (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

## Chapter Two

### *Review of Literature*

The literature review will begin by examining the characteristics of retained students and the anticipated outcomes of grade retention on the academic achievement,

self-esteem, and cognitive competence of students. Further, students' attitudes towards school and teachers' beliefs about grade retention will be addressed. The effects of retention on the social development and dropping out of school will be examined. Finally, a critical analysis of the research will be addressed.

### *Characteristics of Children That Have Been Retained*

Before reviewing how grade retention impacts students, it is imperative to consider those characteristics that make students more susceptible to grade retention. What makes repeaters different from children who are promoted from grade to grade, and what distinguishes different repeaters from one another? Being aware that a child is at risk for retention can lead to increased efforts toward referring such children and families to services that might enhance the child's preparedness for school (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994).

Relative to non-retained children, repeaters are more likely to be boys (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Stroufe, 1997; Meisels & Liaw, 1991; and Reynolds, 1992), to come from lower socioeconomic status families, be from minority groups (Alexander et al., 1994; Meisel & Liaw, 1991), to have poor reading and mathematics test scores (Alexander et al., 1994; Meisels & Liaw, 1991; & Reynolds, 1992), have disruptive classroom behavior (Gottfredson et al, 1994; Hagborg, Masella, Palladino, & Shepardson, 1991), and have parents who are not involved in the schools (Alexander et al., 1994).

As indicated, boys seem to be retained more often than girls (Alexander et al., 1994; Caplan, 1973; Carstons, 1985; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). McCoy and Reynolds



(1999) found the rate of retention for boys was 12.4 percentage points higher than that of girls. Alexander et al. (1994) conducted a study comparing 317 retained students to 458 promoted students. Of the 317 retained students, 57% were males and 43% were females. Caplan (1973) reported while boys are retained significantly more often than girls, the girls who are retained could be easily discriminated from their female counterparts who have been promoted by their more aggressive behavior.

The majority of retained students also are students of different ethnic backgrounds (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971; Alexander et al., 1994; Meisels and Liaw, 1991). In a Alexander et al. (1994) study of 317 retained students, 63% were African American, although African Americans made up only 54% of the entire sample. Another study by Laxley, Crafter, Rodney, and Mupier (1999) examined the variables contributing to grade retention among African American adolescent males. The variables that were positively associated with grade retention were the number of suspensions from school, violence against others, and a lack of discipline in the home. Children who displayed more antisocial behaviors in the elementary grades were at increased risk for low academic achievement and failure. The Laxley et al. (1999) study sample included mostly children whose fathers were absent from the home. According to the authors, the mothers failed to provide sufficient disciplinary measures to prevent the boys from engaging in further antisocial behavior. Also, according to these authors (1999), the lack of male role models for African American boys in general, as well as the education system, could be a factor contributing to the high rates of grade retention among this population. African Americans are three times more likely than Caucasians to be

misplaced in special education, they score lowest on standardized tests, and are retained more often than Caucasians, especially at the elementary level (Laxley et al., 1999).

Regardless of race, many retained students come from disadvantaged family backgrounds. Their families usually have a lower socioeconomic status. Eligibility for reduced-price meals at school can identify students from low-income families.

Alexander et al. (1994) found that 53% of the promoted students and 85% of the retained students qualified for reduced-price meals at school. Lower socioeconomic status also is associated with lower parental educational attainment (Jimerson et al., 1997; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Reynolds, 1992). Smith and Shepard (1989) found retained students' parents averaged almost two years less schooling than promoted students' parents. The retainer parents were more likely to be high school dropouts, while the promoted parents generally had finished high school. Other studies have found that more retained students than promoted students were living in one-parent households (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994; Jimerson et al., 1997; Meisels & Liaw, 1991; Smith & Shepard, 1989). Alexander et al. (1994) found that 61% of a promoted group, and only 42% of a retained group were in two-parent families. Living in a single-parent household is another demographic factor known to put children at academic risk (Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Another parental variable influencing the decision to retain or promote is the level of parental involvement in the school. McCoy and Reynolds (1999) found that the level of parental involvement in school significantly predicted retention during the early grades. Children whose parents were rated as more involved in school activities were 18% less likely to be retained (Reynolds, 1992). Parents' expectations of their child's ability level also can predict retention. Parents of children who failed first grade

evaluated their children's ability to succeed in school less positively in the fall of the first grade year than did parents of the children that were promoted at the end of the year (Cadigan, Entwisle, Alexander, & Pallas, 1988).

Academic difficulties at the beginning of school also are a characteristic that can precede the process of grade retention (Alexander et al., 1994; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Reynolds, 1992). McCoy and Reynolds (1999) identified low reading achievement and mathematics achievement as significant predictors of retention. They discovered that each additional decrease in reading grades (e.g., B to C) was associated with a 10.9 point increase in grade retention, and a 10 point decline in mathematics achievement was associated with a 5 point increase in retention. Measures of school performance in first grade indicated that reading achievement and mathematics achievement were good predictors of retention. Alexander et al. (1994) found large differences between promoted and retained students' reading and mathematics marks. In both math and reading, retainees' initial marks at the beginning of school were well below satisfactory, while promoted children had marks averaging between satisfactory and good in math, and their reading marks were above satisfactory. Retainees also achieve below others on their initial achievement test scores according to the Alexander et al. (1994) study. Students in this study were administered the California Achievement Test (CAT) battery. The average difference for retained and promoted students CAT reading and mathematics subtest scores was 20 points. These large differences at the beginning of school show future retainees begin with academic disadvantage compared to their classmates.

Another predictor of grade retention is a child's school adjustment (Alexander et al., 1994; Gottfredson et al., 1994; Hagborg et al., 1991; Jimerson et al., 1997). Children

who are frequently absent, have difficulty getting along with other children, and have difficulty adjusting to the behavioral demands of the classroom are at a disadvantage in school compared to their well-adjusted classmates. Teachers are more likely to recommend that a student with these characteristics be held back a year. Educators' attitudes about low-achieving students can have a profound influence on whether a child is retained or not. According to the Jimerson et al. (1997) study, teachers rated retained children on the Child Behavior Checklist as having more maladjusted behaviors in the classroom. These students also were ranked lower in terms of their emotional health, peer acceptance, and popularity (Jimerson et al., 1997).

Alexander et al. (1994) evaluated how homeroom teachers rated first grade students on three scales from the 1976-77 National Survey of Children; cooperation, participation, and attention. In this study, their first grade teachers perceived repeaters as less cooperative before they were retained. These retained students also were rated less favorably on enthusiasm and willingness to participate in the classroom. Homeroom teachers were also asked to rank the popularity of their students compared to their classmates. Retained students were rated less popular than their promoted peers. According to the researchers, it is difficult to tell whether this factor is a cause or consequence of non-promotion. Students who do not perform well may be ostracized by their peers, or, because the retained students perform similarly to low performers who are promoted, perhaps teachers evaluate unpopular students less favorably. These behavior ratings indicate that teachers perceive repeaters as not adjusting well to the school routine.

Teachers' beliefs about retention are one of the most influential variables in a decision to retain a student. Nearly all teachers think that retention is a good intervention and has few negative effects on low-achieving students. Smith and Shepard (1989) interviewed teachers to determine their beliefs about retention by evaluating the teacher's practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is based on the first-hand experience of a teacher with specific children and real circumstances. Practical knowledge can be evaluated by looking at a teacher's personal stories of particular events and children in specific situations. In the Smith and Shepard (1989) study, teachers were asked to recall specific children in their own classes who had characteristics that might make them more susceptible to retention, to describe these children in detail, and explain the consequences of these decisions. The teachers' responses classified them as either nativists, remediationists, diagnostic-prescriptive teachers, or interactionists. According to the researchers, nineteen of the forty teachers were classified as nativists. These teachers appeared to believe that within some normal range of environments, children become prepared for school according to an evolutionary, physiological unfolding of abilities. This process is considered to be outside the influence of parents and teachers. According to these nativistic teachers, if a child is in a developmental stage that is inappropriate for kindergarten, teachers should allow more time for the child to grow. Remediationists were described as those teachers who believe children of legal age for kindergarten are ready for school and can be taught. These teachers believe they have the capacity to influence a pupil's readiness and ability to learn. The diagnostic-prescriptive teachers believe any school readiness deficiencies in children of legal school age occur because distinct traits necessary for learning and attention are not intact. They tend to endorse the

remediation of problems with therapies tailored to the defect, whereas remediationists encourage general instruction. Finally, interactionists believe in complex interactions between the psychological nature of the child and the environments provided by the teachers. The environments and materials should be arranged by the teacher based on the child's needs (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

According to Smith and Shepard (1989), it appears that those teachers who believe that children develop readiness for school only as a physiological process are more likely to be those who recommend and practice retention. Nativists also were more likely to rely on such characteristics as measured levels of developmental readiness, chronological age, physical size, and gender in their retention decisions.

Many teachers in the Smith and Shepard (1989) study thought retention prevented frustration, stress, general difficulty in school, retention in subsequent grades, and peer pressure to engage in delinquent behavior later. Few teachers could name any negative effects that retention might produce. The majority of teachers in this 1989 study would rather retain a child that did not need it, than promote a child that needed to be retained. Teachers disregarded the possibility that children might be bored or frustrated by repeating work done before or that these children might experience negative emotions from the retention experience. They fully believed that children's achievement and adjustment would benefit from a second year of instruction (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

A multi-method approach was used to examine teacher's beliefs about retention in grades K-7 (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Responses from the Tomchin and Impara study indicated that teachers at all grade levels believed that retention is an acceptable school practice that prevents students from facing failure and motivates them to work harder.

These same teachers agreed that retention was not harmful in grades K-3, but they disagreed about the impact of retention in grades 4-7. Teachers in the later grades were less likely to retain students and less likely to agree about which characteristics warrant retention. According to Tomchin and Impara (1992), this may be because the prescribed curriculum in the older grades is beyond the basic skills instruction. Also, the acquisition of specific skills is less easy to trace back to one teacher in these later grades. Also, these teachers believed that students assume more responsibility for learning, as they get older.

Teachers and principals tend to agree on the appropriate reasons for retaining a student (Brynes, 1986). Principals believe a lack of basic skills, emotional immaturity and excessive absences are all reasons for grade retention. When principals were asked who they thought should make the final retention decision, they felt it should be up to them. Principals believed retained students most often exhibited immaturity, low self-esteem and low motivation. However, principals indicated smaller classes with more individualized instruction and increased remedial instruction opportunities were preferable to retention as a way of handling poor academic progress (Byrnes, 1986).

Educators overwhelmingly believe that retention benefits students (Brynes, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). They assume that because the child is older and more experienced the second time through, he or she will develop, gain leadership skills, be more comfortable in the school environment, develop better social skills, gain self-confidence, and achieve more academic success.

### *Academic Achievement*

It is important to investigate how grade retention can affect a retained student's academic achievement. Grade retention is a common intervention used by educators to

remediate academic failure. It is not a negative intervention if it benefits students, but are there positive effects from being held back a year in school? Does the student perform better after repeating a grade, or would the student do just as well if he/she had been promoted?

Research shows that grade retention generally does not improve academic achievement (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Some well-designed meta-analysis and longitudinal studies have been done comparing retained and promoted students in the primary, intermediary, and secondary grades (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987; Pierson & Connell, 1992). However, not all studies on grade retention demonstrate negative effects on students' academic achievement. Some studies (Alexander et al., 1994; Peterson et al., 1987) have revealed that grade retention has a positive initial effect on academic achievement, but it is difficult to maintain this improvement after two or more years of school.

Due to the increase in grade retention, more than twenty reviews of retention research have been authored since 1980 (Hauser, 1999). Despite the many studies, valid research on how retention affects children's school performance is limited. Holmes and Matthews (1984) did a comprehensive analysis using a meta-analysis of 63 controlled studies of grade retention in the elementary and middle schools through the mid 1980's. When promoted and retained students were compared one to three years later, the retained student's average levels of academic achievement were at least 0.4 standard deviations below that of promoted students. When Holmes and Matthews (1984) selected



25 studies with the most statistical control, the negative effects of retention were again confirmed.

According to the Holmes and Matthews study (1984), positive effects of retention on academic achievement were demonstrated after one more grade in school. However, this positive gain disappeared after three or more grades. After two years, the retained groups were scoring -.45 standard deviations below the comparison groups who had been promoted to the next grade. Further, at each subsequent year, the difference became larger. Of the 63 studies reviewed in the Holmes and Matthews (1984) meta-analysis, 54 resulted in negative effects from retention. Only 9 studies produced positive effects. The few studies that produced gains also involved intensive remediation, and the retainees were fairly competent in the beginning. These studies also failed to compare retention plus remediation to promotion with an equal amount of remediation (Holmes & Matthews, 1984).

When Holmes and Matthews (1984) examined the effects of retention on achievement by grade of retention, effect sizes in the upper elementary grades were more negative than in the earlier grades. Children who repeated 4<sup>th</sup> grade were later found to be -.37 standard deviations behind promoted students (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). The average effects were -.28 for kindergarten and first graders. The negative outcomes of retention were not as severe in the earlier grades, but the students still did not show any benefits from retention.

Rose et al. (1983) summarized the results from approximately 25 studies on the effects of retention on school achievement. These authors found, on the average that promoted students made gains of 8-12 months in a year, while retained students made

gains of only 6 months. It often took two years for the retained student to learn what the promoted child learned in one year. Roughly 85% of promoted students, as compared to 35% of retained students, were found to be achieving at a normal rate. Based on an examination of more than 6,000 grade retention cases, it was found that only about 20-35% of retainees learned more material in their second year. As many as 40% of the retainees learned less material in their second year in the same grade (Rose et al., 1983).

In the past decade, grade retention studies have commonly used longitudinal designs to determine the effects of retention on children's academic success. Longitudinal studies can provide more accurate results of the impact of grade retention on school performance. For example, a follow-up study of the consequences of grade retention up to age 14 was conducted by McCoy and Reynolds in 1999. McCoy and Reynolds (1999) investigated the effects of retention on low-income minority children from the Chicago longitudinal study conducted by Reynolds in 1992. Originally, Reynolds (1992) investigated the effects of retention during Grades 1 to 3 on the fourth-grade adjustment of low-income minority children. The comparison groups included children from the same age who were promoted instead of retained (same-age comparison), children who were one year younger but are in the same grade as retained children (same-grade comparison), or both. Based on these comparisons, grade retention was found to be significantly related to lower reading and mathematics achievement scores in the fourth year of school. The findings based on same-grade comparisons showed few negative effects on school achievement, but the performance of the retained students remained lower than that of their same-age classmates.

More recently, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) investigated the long-term consequences of grade retention on the children from the Chicago longitudinal study. They found that the retained children had significantly lower reading and mathematics achievement compared to their same-age peers who had been promoted. The retained children scored 9 points lower, on average, than their never-retained peers at age 14. Same-grade comparison findings were similar to those of the previous study, but they found that the reading achievement of the retained children was significantly below that of the same-age comparison group.

Another study by McCombs et al. (1992) examined whether the retention of kindergarten and first-grade children was associated with long-term beneficial effects. Retained children were compared to children who were in the same grade, but had never been retained. The results showed that retention was not associated with long-term beneficial effects, but was associated with poorer academic and social functioning. This was especially true for retained Caucasian students, who fared less well academically in terms of what the teacher perceived as cognitive and social competence. The authors speculated that Caucasian students were more likely to be stigmatized by retention than were African American students because a Caucasian student was less likely to be retained than an African American student. Therefore, when a Caucasian student is retained, teachers perceived him or her as more academically or socially incompetent. The McCombs et al. (1992) study concluded that retention does not have any long-term beneficial effects. These results suggested, particularly for Caucasian students, that retention was associated with less positive academic and social functioning.

A study done by Johnson, Merrell, and Stover (1990) investigated the academic effects of early grade retention on a group of fourth-grade students who had been retained at the K-1 level. Comparisons were made between the retained fourth-grade students, the fourth-grade students who had been recommended for retention at the K-1 level but who were not actually retained, and the fourth-grade students who had made normal progress in school. No significant differences in academic achievement were found between the retained student and those recommended for retention. Both of these groups of students scored significantly lower on several academic achievement measures than the normally progressing comparison groups. The results of this study indicated that grade retention had no effect on academic achievement.

In contrast, some recent studies indicate that retention can have some positive effects on academic performance. In their Beginning School Study, Alexander et al. (1994) examined the effects of retention in Grades 1-3. The study used multiple comparison groups and a comprehensive set of control variables, such as academic performance prior to retention and later special education placement. The results indicated that even though the post-retention academic performance of retained children remained lower than that of both the same-age and same-grade comparison groups, the performance gap between the retained and non-retained children narrowed from preretention levels up to the eighth year of school. This was particularly true for second and third graders. First graders, however, displayed less academic progress than those who were retained in second or third grade.

Based on same-grade comparisons, Peterson et al. (1987) and Pierson and Connell (1992) also found some positive academic effects of grade retention. Peterson et al.,

(1987) studied the long-term impact of retention and promotion on the academic achievement of primary grade students. First, second, and third graders were matched on several variables with their same age peers who were not retained. The results suggested that retained students improved their relative class standing by the end of the retained year, and they sometimes they maintained this improvement over a 2-year period. After three years, though, there were no differences between retained and promoted students. The Peterson et al. (1997) study also examined the impact of combining retention with remediation in comparison to social promotion without remediation. A program of retention plus remediation led to greater achievement gains than retention alone. However, the researchers concluded that social promotion with remediation might be more effective than retention with remediation.

Pierson and Connell (1992) did a study comparing 74 retained students in grades 3-6. They examined 69 matched ability samples of socially promoted students with similar students who were retained. From the study, it appeared that students whose academic performance suggested they should be retained (and who were) performed ahead of promoted students of similar ability and comparable performance two or more years later. The retained students, however, did not do as well as the promoted students who were randomly selected from their current classroom. In this study, the teachers did not describe the retained students as motivated as the non-retained students. Further, in the Pierson and Connell (1992) study, the retained students did not perform as well as or exerted as much effort as the non-retained classmates who were matched by ability.

Grade retention has been reviewed as a remedial intervention for academic failure. The understanding is that by repeating a grade, children will “catch up” with the

next grade cohort. According to several studies, the sole use of grade retention should not be expected to remediate a student's academic problems (Peterson et al., 1987; Pierson & Connell, 1992). However, grade retention plus remediation may help students be more successful in school. Several research findings (Holmes & Matthews, 1984, Jackson, 1975; Johnson et al., 1990; Shepard & Smith, 1989) indicate that grade retention was an insufficient intervention for improving student achievement. The majority of achievement comparison studies between retained and similar students who were promoted concluded that retained children consistently do not perform as well as their promoted peers.

#### *Socio-Emotional Development*

It is important to consider how retention affects different areas of a child's development. Being identified as a failure by the school may not only affect a student's intellectual or academic development, but also his or her emotional and social development. The majority of children are held back in grades 1 through 3, when children's sense of self is being formed (Smith & Shepard, 1989). Therefore, the act of retention may be especially critical at this time in a child's development.

The impact of the school environment on all areas of development must be examined simultaneously. Educators need to recognize how affective variables can contribute to educational performance. Few research studies have been done on how grade retention affects self-esteem and social development. Most of the previous studies have focused on achievement, rather than affective, variables.

#### *Self-esteem and Self-Concept.*

Self-esteem was defined by Coopersmith (1990) as “the evaluation a person makes and customarily maintains with regard to him or herself; overall self-esteem is an expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes himself or herself as competent, successful, significant, and worthy.” According to Berk (1997), self-concept is the sum total of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values that an individual believes that defines who he or she is. There have been mixed results indicating whether grade retention has a positive, negative, or no effect on self-esteem and self-concept.

Contrary to most beliefs about grade retention, some studies have found positive results on self-concept measures after grade retention (Finlayson, 1977; Plummer & Graziano, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1989). For example, Plummer and Graziano (1987) assessed second through fifth graders’ self-esteem after being held a back a grade. The retained children had more positive self-esteem than did the regularly promoted children. Finlayson (1977) also found that youngsters’ self-concepts were higher in their repeated year. He reported a longitudinal study on the effect of non-promotion upon the self-concepts of primary grade students. His research purpose was to determine whether a poor self-concept led to school failure or whether school failure led to a poor self-concept. The study found that the non-promoted students’ self-concepts significantly increased, while the students that were almost retained and promoted students’ self-concepts dropped slightly during the second year of the study. During the fourth year of the Finlayson (1977) study, the self-concept scores of the promoted and non-promoted students were almost indistinguishable. Finlayson (1977) hypothesized that these results

may be because students' self-concepts tend to become less positive as they mature in the primary grades.

The Finlayson (1977) study also interviewed teachers and parents regarding their beliefs about the retained students' self-perceptions. Teachers described almost 75% of the students recommended for retention as having positive self-concepts prior to non-promotion. Teachers perceived the self-concepts of the non-promoted children as either remaining stable or becoming more positive in 96% of the cases during the repeated year. More than half of the parents reported that their child liked school more during the second year in the same grade. The majority of the parents described their non-promoted children as being more confident during the repeated year of school.

In 1989, Shepard and Smith found similar results for primary students who had been retained. They interviewed students and parents to assess a student's academic self-confidence before and after grade retention. A self-image scale was administered to the students in the fall and spring of grades 1, 2, 4, and 8. In first grade, the never-retained students had the highest self-esteem, followed by the never-retained poorly performing students. Prior to retention, the future first grade retainees had the lowest self-esteem. Further, they tested poorly, received lower report card marks, and had other adjustment problems at the beginning of first grade. Their self-assessments suggested that these students were aware of their poor performance.

In the second year, according to the Shepard and Smith (1989) study, the first grade repeaters' academic self-assessments were actually higher than before the retention in the first grade. The repeaters' report card marks and test scores also improved after



they went through a grade for the second time. In contrast, the second grade average for the never-retained children was lower than their first grade average.

In fourth grade, the first grade repeaters' fourth grade self-assessments average dropped below that from first grade level, which initially was the lowest of any group in the Shepard and Smith (1989) study. Shepard and Smith (1989) found every group's self-assessment average was lower in fourth grade than in second grade. Over the time period from first grade to fourth grade, the first grade repeaters had the smallest decline of any group. According to the authors (Shepard & Smith, 1989), these results could be because repeaters' level of academic self-esteem holds up better than that of their same aged peers.

In eighth grade, the first grade repeaters' average self-esteem scores were down, while the promoted students' averages increased. By eighth grade, the first grade repeaters' improvements compared to promoted youngsters dissipated. Since middle school is five years after first graders repeated a year, the authors (Shepard & Smith, 1989) hypothesized that the transition into middle school is generally challenging for all children, and retainees may have particular difficulty sustaining academic advances from elementary school into middle school. From the results of this study, it seems the negative effects on 1<sup>st</sup> graders did not surface until 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but the 1<sup>st</sup> graders' self-concepts were higher in the elementary grades after being retained.

In contrast, some studies have found that retained children have more negative self-concepts. White and Howard (1973) administered the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale to 624 6<sup>th</sup> graders who were promoted or repeated one or two grades in elementary school. The students who did not fail had more positive self-concepts than those who

had failed. Further, those students who failed only one grade had more positive self-ratings than those students who failed two grades.

Setencich (1994) also focused on the impact of early grade retention on self-esteem. She evaluated the long-term impact of non-promotion in kindergarten or first grade on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders' self-esteem. The retained students yielded significantly lower self-esteem scores than the promoted students.

Another longitudinal study by Jimerson et al. (1997) evaluated the self-esteem of retained students. They compared groups of retained students, retained low-achieving students, and control students. These researchers examined the achievement and adjustment of these groups throughout the elementary years and at age 16. Even though the retained students received an extra year of instruction, the groups were comparable on measures of self-worth. After completing first-grade, the retained and the low achieving, but promoted students continued to display similar levels of self-worth. Second-grade results revealed that the retained group ranked the lowest on emotional health. The retained students' initial levels of maladjustment continued despite the intervention of providing an extra year for them to "mature." In sixth grade, the retained group demonstrated significantly lower rankings on the emotional health/self-esteem indices in comparison to the other groups.

Pomplun (1988) uncovered similar findings over time in retained students' self-concepts. At the primary level, the students showed stable self-concepts two years after being retained. At the beginning of the second year, the retained students showed an increase in their self-concepts. In the intermediate grades, the retained students displayed a significant decrease in their self-concepts. This decrease in self-concept also was

evident at the secondary level. It appeared that, despite the primary students' self-concepts remaining relatively stable, the retained students' self-concepts decreased over time.

Hagborg et al. (1991) also found similar results at the secondary level for students with a prior history of retention. On school-record data, the retained students reported significantly lower self-esteem on the Scholastic Competence, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-worth subscales of the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Hagborg et al., 1991). It was found that the later a student was retained was associated with less-positive school attitudes, lower educational expectations, and lower self-esteem.

Holmes and Matthews (1984) did a meta-analysis reviewing nine studies on the effects of retention on the self-concepts of students who had been retained. Using data from these studies, 34 effect sizes were calculated. On self-concept measures, the promoted pupils significantly outscored the retained pupils by .19 standard deviation units.

#### *Cognitive Competence.*

A student's self-esteem is a critical variable in determining his/her level of cognitive competence. Connell (1990) evaluated the effectiveness of retention on emotional development through a self-systems model. This model purports a theoretical framework that includes a set of motivational variables believed to be associated with grade retention. According to the model, individuals are motivated to engage in activities that meet their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Thus, in a school environment, a student's need for autonomy is met when they believe they have a choice about what they are doing and value their choice. Their need for competence is

met if they believe they can meet their desired goals, and their need for relatedness is met if they believe they are accepted by their peers and teachers. According to the authors (Pierson & Connell, 1992), if students feel their school experience meets their needs, they are more likely to be engaged in school.

Children's cognitive competence is based on their belief that they can control their academic outcomes, their understanding of what it takes to do well in school, and their belief that they have the ability to succeed in school (Pierson & Connell, 1992). Academic performance and school engagement are enhanced by perceiving that they have the cognitive competence to do well in school. Pierson and Connell (1992) found when they asked students what they believe it takes to do well in school, retained children responded that they think getting the teacher to like them, their ability, their effort, and luck help them to succeed in school. The retained students also reported less adaptive strategies for achieving success and avoiding failure, lower perceived abilities to be smart in school and produce effort, and more negative control beliefs than did randomly selected subjects.

McCoy and Reynolds's (1999) study found that grade retention was unrelated to children's perceived school competence. However, in the Reynolds (1992) study, grade retention was related with significantly more positive perceptions of school competence. Retained children with more physical maturity and personal expectations were more likely to rate their competence more favorably compared to their new, younger classmates. In the McCoy and Reynolds (1999) study, retained and non-retained students had similar perceptions of competence by age 12. The study's authors speculated that the transition to adolescence might alter personal perceptions of competence among low-

achieving children as school norms of academic success become more internalized over time.

Shepard and Smith (1989) also examined children's expectations for their report card marks, which can be reflections of their academic competence. Children's mark expectations were evaluated in reading and math. Children were asked to predict the marks they would receive at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. They were to categorize their anticipated marks as being excellent, good, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory. In 1<sup>st</sup> grade, the children predicted their marks would be "good" or better. In reality, their marks were somewhere between "satisfactory" and "good". First grade repeaters were especially optimistic about their marks. Even though 1<sup>st</sup> grade repeaters had the lowest anticipated marks in reading and math, their actual performance was still lower. In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 1<sup>st</sup> grade repeaters' expectations were not lower than they were before being retained in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Instead, their expectations either increased or held steady. After 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, expectations lowered for everyone. The authors hypothesized that these students became more skilled at processing feedback, and the students began to recognize that their marks sometimes do not meet their expectations.

#### *Attitudes of Students.*

Rather than using standardized test scores or self-concept ratings, children's accounts of what it means to be held back can be used to measure the effects of retention. Many times, children refer to being held back a grade as 'flunking.' Byrnes (1986) wanted to learn more about non-promoted students' opinions on 'flunking.' She interviewed 71 retained children in grades 1, 3, and 6. Despite the efforts of researchers to avoid labeling the retention experience as negative, children referred to the experience

as 'flunking.' Of the 71 children who were repeating a grade, 73% admitted having been 'flunked.' Interestingly, first grade girls were less likely than the boys to admit they had been retained. Many of the children who were reluctant to admit being retained, identified other children in their classrooms who had been retained. Therefore, these children appeared to understand the concept of retention. The authors speculated that the girls' reluctance to admit to being retained might indicate that the girls' self-concepts are more related to school success. Another hypothesis was that girls are more aware of the social stigma of grade retention.

In the same study (Byrnes, 1986), when non-promoted students were asked how they would feel about being retained, 84% replied 'sad,' 'bad,' and 'upset.' When non-promoted students were asked how their parents would react about their repeating a grade, 46% replied 'mad,' or 28% 'sad' and 8% felt their parents would not care. Children also were asked how they discovered they were going to be retained. Forty-two percent of the children answered by their report cards. The next most common response was information from parents, followed by teachers. Seventy percent of the children reported that their teachers had discussed being held back a year with them. When children were asked why they thought they had been retained, their responses included 'not getting good grades.' Statements also were made regarding behavior problems, missing school, and not knowing English. Students' perceptions of why they were retained were compared with the school records of why they were retained. The 1<sup>st</sup> graders were accurate 50% of the time. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders were accurate 66% of the time.

In the Byrnes (1986) study, the non-promoted children were asked what was the worst thing about not passing. They also were asked what would be good about retention. The most common negative response was 'being laughed at and teased,' 'not being with friends,' and 'being punished.' Most of the retained children found it difficult to think of something good about not being promoted. Twenty-one percent declared there was nothing good about being retained.

Other studies also have verified that retained children find retention to be a negative experience that leads to a less positive attitude about school. Holmes and Matthews (1984) meta-analysis reviewed eight studies measuring students' attitudes toward school. The differences between the groups indicated that retained students held school in less favor than the promoted students.

#### *Social Development.*

Recently many questions have been raised about the socialization mission of the schools (Sandin, 1944). It seems that the focus on academic competency may have taken a backseat to social and interpersonal values. There is some controversy over whether schools should direct their focus toward academics or social development. Little is known about the effects of grade retention on social development because most researchers generally investigate the effects of grade retention on academic progress.

The first study to examine the social and emotional adjustment of regularly promoted and retained children was completed by Sandin in 1944. He gathered information from interviews, classroom observations, and student records. Sandin hypothesized that when retained students are placed with classmates who are younger, smaller, and less mature than themselves they are more likely to be rejected by their

classmates. Interviews with these children indicated that children tended to believe that classmates of a different status were too different in age, sizes, interests, and social maturity to be friends. The promoted children were less likely to choose non-promoted students as study companions. Also, the retained children faced significant criticism and ridicule, and were perceived by peers to exhibit more negative behavior.

According to Pierson and Connell (1992), peers play an important role in the socialization of children. When children repeat a grade, they are often removed from their familiar peer group and placed in an unfamiliar one. One would assume that retention would initially decrease the retained students' perceived relatedness to their classmates. However, the direction of that change is virtually unknown. For those students who have had positive relations, the change may be negative, whereas for those who have been rejected, the change may be positive. Students with good social skills may have an easier time making friends in their new grade placement, whereas students with poor social skills may continue to have difficulty making friends (Pierson & Connell, 1992).

A study was conducted by Plummer and Graziano (1987) on the peer relations of 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade retainees. This study focused on how the processes of peer interactions might contribute to the negative effects of grade retention. When children chose a partner for a non-school activity, they preferred to choose the promoted child. Independent of retention status, height appeared to influence the children's evaluations of peers. In general, when children chose a partner for help on a school-related activity, the retained child was preferred over the promoted child. Many children assumed the retained child had more experience with academic tasks. Younger children expected the



retained child to be better liked. Such positive treatment by peers enhanced the retained children's self-evaluations (Pierson & Connell, 1992).

Some studies have found that grade retention does not negatively influence social adjustment. Cuddy (1987) compared 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade retained, promoted, and low-achieving, but promoted students. The children were asked to vote for three classmates they liked best, and three they liked least. Promotion and retention did not appear to influence peer-nominated popularity, however, promotion led to fewer rejections by peers than did retention. According to Cuddy (1987), the effects of retention and promotion upon peer rejection may become more apparent in middle school, and these effects may differ by sex given the time of puberty tends to be earlier for girls than for boys.

### *School Dropout*

One of the most serious consequences of grade retention is the risk of school dropout for students that are held back a grade. In 1990, the president of the United States and the nations' governors set a goal to increase the high school graduate rate to 90% by the year 2000 as one of the six National Goals of Education. The United States Census Bureau estimated that 11% of all youth 16-24 years of age in 1992 were dropouts (McMillen, Kaufman, Hausken, & Bradby, 1993). Dropout rates were 8% for Caucasian youth age 16-24 in 1992, but 14% for African Americans and 29% for Hispanics (Rumberger, 1995). In 1989, Shepard and Smith estimated an annual retention rate of 5-7%. This is about 2.4 million students in the United States being retained annually at an expense exceeding 14 billion a year. Academic failure is one of the largest predictors of school dropout. To many teachers deciding whether a student should be retained, a

student's later pupil career and successful completion of school are distant considerations. To the high school counselor, the concern for keeping students in school may be a more immediate concern. The importance of the correlation between grade retention and school dropout has often been disregarded because of the obvious explanation that poor achievement can account for both the retention and leaving school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

Before examining the relationship between grade retention and school dropout, it is important to understand the association between grade retention and adolescent problem behavior. It is possible that the experience of grade retention may cause adolescent problem behaviors, or that both grade retention and problem behaviors can be explained by an underlying predisposition to fail (Gottfredson et al., 1994). This underlying predisposition to fail may be caused by a pattern of personal characteristics. This pattern may consist of an inability to defer gratification, emotionality, a tendency to be easily irritated and angered, and difficulty maintaining self-control. This perspective suggests that grade retention has little effect on adolescent problem behavior because it is simply the result of low self-control. Among personal factors, a disruptive behavioral profile has been shown to predict dropping out of school after controlling for familial and socioeconomic factors (Gottfredson et al., 1994). Disruptiveness may lead to dropping out because it can contribute to school problems that are instrumental to grade retention. For example, Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992) reported that aggressive behaviors and low grades as early as first grade predicted later school dropouts. Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (1997) also showed that disruptiveness exhibited as early as

kindergarten was related to dropping out of school, even after controlling for sociodemographic variables and IQ.

Previous research suggests that grade retention does coincide with adolescent problem behavior, particularly dropping out of school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995). Other variables that distinguish graduates from dropouts are lower socioeconomic backgrounds, having little school support from their families, performing poorly on academic tasks, having low self-esteem, and exhibiting a history of absenteeism and having trouble in school. Bachman et al. (1971) determined that dropping out of school could be predicted from a combination of background, school experience, and personality measures. Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (1997) found that school experience appeared to be only a slightly better predictor of school dropout than family background. Many potential dropouts usually have been retained, have had poor academic grades, and have felt disengaged from school.

Most of the research on the causes of dropping out of school has focused on two different levels of analysis. One is at the individual level, where the researchers attempt to identify the wide range factors in and out of school that may influence a student's decision to drop out of school. Other research has focused on the school or institutional level. The purpose of this type of research has been to identify the characteristics of school systems that influence dropout rates.

Rumberger (1995) focused on dropouts from middle school. This issue was examined from both an individual and institutional perspective. At the individual level, the Rumberger (1995) results suggested a number of family and school experience factors that influenced the decision to leave school, with grade retention being the most

powerful predictor. Some demographic variables also were highly correlated with the tendency to leave school. For example, dropout rates were higher for Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics. Socioeconomic status also was a strong predictor of school dropout. Students from single-parent and stepfamilies were more susceptible to dropping out, and there appeared to be a large number of negative school-related experiences that were associated with dropouts. Further, dropouts are more likely to have poor school performance, exhibit disruptive behavior, have poor attendance, display negative attitudes toward school, and have been retained in the early grades.

At the institutional level, the Rumberger (1995) results suggested that the mean dropout rates vary widely between schools, and most of the differences in dropout rates can be explained by the background characteristics of the student population. Low socioeconomic schools show widespread differences in their mean dropout rates. Schools that have a large population of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have higher dropout rates. The type of school (private versus public), the number of resources available, and the system's organization (rules, decision-making, and climate of the school) has been shown to affect school effectiveness.

There is some skepticism as to whether grade retention directly increases the risk of dropping out, or whether poor achievement explains both retention and dropping out. Some studies have adjusted for student achievement before examining the effect of retention on dropping out (Gottfredson et al., 1994; Hess & Lauber, 1984). Hess and Lauber (1984) controlled for achievement by comparing normal-age and overage dropout rates within achievement strata. They found that normal-age students with low reading

achievement scores were more likely to drop out; however, the dropout rate was even higher for overage students with average scores.

Grissom and Shepard (1989) reviewed three studies and analyzed new data from three schools, while controlling for the effects of poor achievement. They looked at the retention-dropout relationship through causal modeling techniques to assess the direct effect of retention on dropping out while controlling for school achievement, socioeconomic status, student sex, and ethnicity. The findings indicated that retained students experience a greater risk for dropping out. This risk cannot be explained by their poor achievement. These authors suggested that being retained might push a student out of school by reinforcing the youth's self-perception as a failure in school. According to Grissom and Shepard (1989), the retention experience may encourage greater susceptibility to the attractions of adult roles, thereby tempting students to drop out of school. Dropouts often report they leave school because they 'did not like school' or had 'poor grades.' Some schools push students out by sending them negative messages about academics and behavior. These messages eventually accumulate into problems that lead to failing courses and not having enough credits to graduate. Therefore, the choice to drop out may be more appealing than adding an extra year of instruction which seems to be a negative experience for these students (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

A more recent longitudinal study determined the antecedents for leaving school among elementary, middle, and high school students from an urban public school (Roderick, 1994). Roderick (1994) hypothesized that students who experience retention may face an increased risk of leaving school because they do more poorly in school or

have lower self-esteem. Another hypothesis from the Roderick (1994) study was that those who are retained might be at a higher risk for dropping out because grade retention makes them overage for grade.

The purpose of Roderick's study (1994) was to identify how much of the association between grade retention and dropout was related to the sole impact of grade retention. It also sought to determine the impact of grade retention on later school performance. Her results indicated that early kindergarten through third and late fourth grade retentions were associated with significantly increasing rates of dropping out. Her results found the odds would be 75% higher for a student who repeated a grade between kindergarten and third grade. Repeating a grade between fourth through sixth grade was found to be associated with a 90% increase in dropping out. The Roderick (1994) results suggest there may be an effect of repeating a grade that occurs independently of school performance and of the grade in which a youth is retained. This study suggests that early or late grade retention does not differently affect the rate of dropping out.

In the Roderick (1994) sample, some of the students were overage for grade because of retention, some had never repeated a grade but were overage for grade, and others were immigrants. Fifty-eighty percent of the students who were overage for grade, but had never experienced retention prior to seventh grade later dropped out of school. These results suggest that the relation between grade retention and school dropout can be explained by being overage for grade. As students enter adolescence, being older than their peers becomes more apparent and more problematic.

A 21-year, prospective longitudinal study by Jimerson (1999) was conducted to determine the long-term efficacy of early grade retention. Jimerson's (1999) results

suggested that retained students have a greater probability of poor educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence. Retained students were found to be more likely to drop out of school by age 19, were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20, were less likely to be enrolled in a post-secondary education program, and were more likely to receive lower employment status ratings by employers. Further, retained students were paid less per hour and received poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low-achieving students.

### Chapter Three

#### *Conclusions and Discussion*

The purpose of this literature review was to determine whether or not grade retention has any positive effects on the academic, social, and emotional development of students. Numerous studies indicate mixed results for children who have been retained. However, most studies have not supported grade retention as an effective intervention strategy for academic failure.

The practice of grade retention has been studied and researched for educational and political purposes during the past thirty-five years. Schools are being pressured to improve the quality of education. As a result, many are enforcing more rigorous retention policies. It is important for students to meet the rigid grade-to-grade promotion standards that are being imposed as part of educational reform efforts. With increasing numbers of students being retained, there has been a push for more educational research to support the effectiveness of grade retention as a remedial strategy for academic failure.

Many studies indicate that grade retention is an insufficient remedial strategy for promoting student achievement, particularly over the long term. Considering the costs of

grade retention, one would assume that there would be research supporting its effectiveness as an intervention. Rather, retention practices are used even though there are minimal studies to support retention as an intervention. In 1975, Jackson stated: “Thus, those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade” p. 627.

Previous studies have confirmed some characteristics that make students more susceptible to grade retention. Retainees generally come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and their parents usually have lower educational attainment. Most retained students are living in one-parent households (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994; Jimerson et al., 1997). Lower levels of parental involvement in the schools also have been shown to predict grade retention (Alexander et al., 1994; Byrd & Weitzman, 1994; Reynolds, 1992). Research also has found that more boys than girls are retained (Alexander et al., 1994; Caplan, 1973; Carstons, 1985; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), and the majority of retainees are ethnic minority students (Abidin et al., 1971; Alexander et al., 1994; Laxley et al., 1999).

Retained students also are more likely to have academic difficulties before they are held back a grade. Reading and mathematics achievement have been found to be significant predictors of grade retention. At the beginning of school, retained students’ math and reading marks tend to be well below satisfactory while promoted students have marks averaging between satisfactory and good. Retained students also perform significantly worse than promoted students on achievement tests (Alexander et al., 1994; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999).



Another characteristic among retained students is their level of school adjustment. Teachers describe them as having difficulty getting along with peers and being more maladjusted in the classroom. Retained students were also ranked as less popular compared to their promoted peers. However, it is difficult to tell whether this factor is a cause or consequence of non-promotion (Alexander et al., 1994; Jimerson et al, 1997; Smith & Shepard, 1989).

The majority of teachers and principals believe retention is an effective intervention for low-achieving students and it has few negative effects on students. Many teachers believe that children become prepared for school according to an evolutionary, physiological unfolding of abilities. These teachers suggest giving a child more time to grow until the child is in a developmentally appropriate stage for kindergarten (Smith & Shepard, 1989). Teachers who believe children develop school readiness only as a physiological process are more likely to retain students. Most teachers think grade retention will remediate students who are academically failing. Teachers rationale is that a child will be older and more experienced the second time through, will develop leadership and social skills, be more confident, and achieve more academic success (Shepard and Smith, 1989).

Most research indicates that academic achievement does not improve after a student has been retained (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; McCombs et al., 1992; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Reynolds, 1992). Some studies have found that grade retention has an initial positive effect, but most students do not maintain this improvement after a few years (Alexander et al., 1994; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Peterson et al., 1987). The few studies that have resulted in positive academic effects

have involved intensive remediation during the retention year (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Peterson et al., 1987).

Findings on the effects of grade retention on socio-emotional development have been mixed. Studies comparing retained students to promoted students have found that retained children had the lowest self-esteem (Hagborg et al., 1991; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson et al., 1997; Poplum; Setenich, 1994; Smith & Shepard, 1989). A complicating factor is that self-esteem levels may rise and fall depending on which grade the student was in when he/she was assessed. It is common for student's self-concept to lower as they get older, particularly during a student's transition into middle school (Jimerson et al., 1997; Poplum). Some studies have found that student's self-esteem was higher in the repeated year (Finlayson, 1977), and other studies have found no differences between retained and promoted student's self-esteem (Ammon, 1976).

There are some possible theories about why retained children's self-concepts were higher or indistinguishable from their regularly promoted classmates. One possibility is that the higher self-esteem ratings of retained children reflect defensive responding. When children with undesirable qualities are asked about those qualities, the children may use the defense of denial or repression, or do not admit their feelings about themselves. Another possibility is that grade retention might enhance self-concepts because it provides retained children with some positive experiences through social comparison. Retained children are placed in classrooms where the work should be familiar. Therefore, they may perform relatively better in this situation than they have in previous classrooms. Because they are placed in a situation where they perform better than their classmates, their self-evaluations may be higher. A final explanation involves

bias regarding past theories about grade retention. It is assumed that retained children will have lower self-esteem because of their academic failures. However, some children may interpret achievement in mastery-oriented terms. These children may believe failure can be overcome through greater effort or more experience (Plummer & Graziano, 1987).

Students who have been held back a year report less adaptive strategies for avoiding failure and lower perceived ability to do well in school (Pierson & Connell, 1992). Other studies have found grade retention was related with more positive perceptions of school competence. According to Reynolds (1992), retained students with more physical maturity are more likely to rate their competence more positively than younger classmates.

Research supports that retained students find retention to be a negative experience and have less positive attitudes towards school (Byrnes, 1986; Holmes & Matthews, 1984). When children were asked if they had ever flunked a grade, boys were more likely to admit to flunking than girls. The children who did not admit to flunking a grade were able to identify other children who had been held back a grade. Therefore, these children appeared to understand the concept of grade retention. Interviews with retained students found that the majority of non-promoted students reported they had felt 'angry' and 'sad' about being retained. Students believed that the worst things about being retained were 'being laughed at,' 'not being with friends,' 'and being punished.'

Little is known about the effects of grade retention on social development because it has taken a backseat to those investigations on the effects of grade retention on academic achievement. It is evident that peers play an important role in the socialization of retained children, but whether that role is positive or negative is unknown. For those

students who have had positive relations, the change in grade may be negative, whereas for those students who have had negative relations, the change in grade may be positive. The direction of change may depend on the child's social skills or age. Generally, when retained students are placed with younger classmates, they are more likely to be rejected by their peers. Research indicates children are less likely to choose non-promoted students as their study companions, and they assume non-promoted students will exhibit more negative behavior. However, primary grade students tend to discriminate against children based on their size. Retained children may have higher status among their younger peers due to their relative size and age. Grade level peers may assume a child who is bigger would be better at school and more popular (Plummer & Graziano, 1987; Cuddy, 1987). The effects of retention and promotion upon peer rejection may become more clear in the middle school years.

A primary negative outcome of grade retention is the tendency for retained students to eventually drop out of school. Most of the research on school dropout has been analyzed from an individual and institutional level to identify the factors that influence dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995). From an individual level, one can identify the characteristics of a student that influence a student's decision to dropout. At the institutional level, one can determine the prospect of dropping out based on the school environment (socioeconomic status of the school, available resources, and whether public or private) (Rumberger, 1995). The importance of the correlation between grade retention and school dropout has often been ignored because of the explanation that poor achievement accounts for retention and leaving school.

Some dropout studies have controlled for achievement. These studies have found that normal-age students with low achievement are likely to dropout, but the dropout rate is even higher for overage students that receive average grades (Hess & Lauber, 1984; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Roderick, 1994). It may be that being overage for grade because of retention is the causal factor that leads to school dropout. Retention may push a student out of school by reinforcing the youth's self-perception as a failure in school. As students enter adolescence, being older than their peers may become more apparent and problematic. The middle school years are a critical period in a student's development during which they begin to define their roles in relation to their peers and environment. Being overage for grade may make them feel like failures, resulting in lower self-esteem. Also, being overage for grade may place students at risk for dropping out because they are more likely than other children to become disengaged from school during adolescence.

School policies and practices can help decrease school dropouts. Discipline policies, grade retention policies, and procedures affecting school transfers can all affect a student's decision to remain in school. Schools can rectify school dropout rates by addressing parenting practices, by encouraging parents to become involved in schools and offering parenting inservices. Schools also need to be more cognizant of ethnic and cultural differences if they want to improve the graduation rate of ethnic minorities.

Very few research studies have done a comprehensive review on how grade retention can impact a student's academic, social, and emotional development. The majority of studies have evaluated the outcomes of grade retention separately. However, studies suggest that grade retention is not the best intervention for academic failure.

Therefore, school personnel, including administrators, teachers, counselors, and school psychologists, need to consider this information and make their decisions accordingly.

Educators need to be informed about the empirical studies of retention and bring these findings to the attention of other school authorities. There has been little research done assessing teachers, principals, counselors, and school psychologists' attitudes towards grade retention and why educators continue to ignore the research regarding the practice of grade retention. Two studies (Byrnes, 1986; Tomchin & Impara, 1992) have interviewed teachers and principals about their position on grade retention, but virtually no research has been done on counselors' and psychologists' attitudes toward grade retention. Future research should attempt to understand educators' perceptions of grade retention, focus on the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of grade retention, and explore alternative interventions.

The majority of the previous research focuses on the academic outcomes of grade retention, and little has been done on the socio-emotional effects. Therefore, more research needs to investigate the socio-emotional and developmental effects of retention. Furthermore, future research should focus on the efficacy of alternative interventions, which might include efficacious instructional materials, summer school programs, one-on-one tutoring, and formative evaluation (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Finally, there needs to be more longitudinal and controlled studies done on grade retention that match promoted and retained students by grade level, sex, chronological age, mental age, IQ, academic grades, achievement test scores, adjustment, and socioeconomic status (Jackson, 1975).

*Limitations of the Literature Review*

There are three possible limitations of the proposed study. First, the majority of the previous studies done on grade retention have been correlation studies. Therefore, causal connections cannot be inferred from these studies. Second, this investigation is a review of the literature. It is not an empirical study. As such, it is not supported by means of empirical observations or experimentation. Finally, there may be researcher bias because the literature review was conducted from only one researcher's perspective. Therefore, the researcher may have emphasized particular points of view because of her preconceived notions regarding retention.

### *Summary*

Over the past decade, there has been public and political pressure to improve the quality of education. Schools are encouraged to adopt grade retention policies to help children who are not achieving satisfactorily. Given the large number of students that will be affected by this educational intervention, a study of the effectiveness of retention is worthy of educational research. Thus, a literature review was conducted to determine the characteristics of a student that can make him or her more susceptible to grade retention. It also reviewed the academic, social, and emotional effectiveness of retention as an intervention. Results indicate that there are some personal characteristics that can predict grade retention. In addition, few positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes of grade retention were identified.

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